



## Frequently Asked Questions about Colposcopy

### What is a colposcopy? What are the benefits of colposcopy?

Colposcopy is a procedure that uses a special microscope (called a colposcope) to look into the vagina and to look very closely at the *cervix* (the opening to the uterus, or womb).

The colposcope magnifies, or enlarges, the image of the outer portion of the cervix. It is somewhat like looking through a pair of binoculars. This allows the health care provider to see the outer portion of the cervix better. Sometimes a small sample of tissue (called a *biopsy*) is taken for further study. The tissue samples help the health care provider to figure out how to treat any problems found. And, if cancer of the cervix is found early, or a precancerous change of cells is found, it can be treated and almost always can be cured. Also, for precancers and early cancers of the cervix, sometimes removal of part of the cervix may be the only treatment needed.

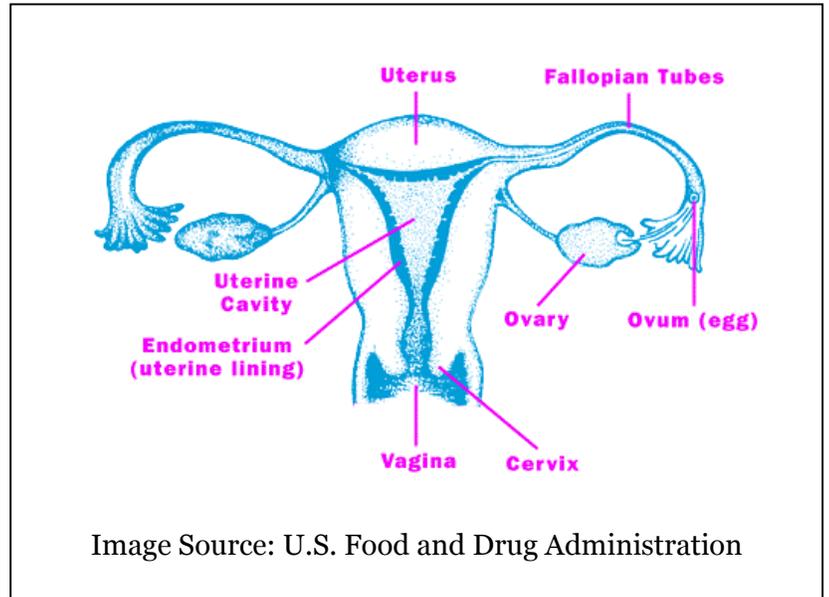


Image Source: U.S. Food and Drug Administration

### Why would a woman need a colposcopy?

Colposcopy is usually done when a woman has an abnormal Pap test. (Pap tests are done on a regular basis to screen for cancer of the cervix and other problems.) Other reasons a woman may need a colposcopy is when, during a pelvic exam, the cervix, *vagina*, or *vulva* ("lips," or opening to the vagina) looks abnormal to the health care provider.

### What happens during the procedure? Does it hurt?

When you have a colposcopy, you will lie on an exam table just like you do when you have a regular pelvic exam. The health care provider uses an instrument called a speculum to spread the walls of the vagina apart. She or he then places the colposcope, which is like a microscope with a light on the end, at the opening of the vagina. The colposcope does not enter the vagina. The health care provider will look inside the vagina to locate any problem areas on the cervix (opening to the uterus, or womb) or in the vagina. If any areas are of concern, the health care provider may take a small tissue sample (called a biopsy). When this is done, the health care provider first numbs the area but you may feel a slight pinch or cramp. The tissue is then sent to a lab for further study.

## **What happens after the procedure? How do you feel?**

Your health care provider will talk with you about what she or he saw inside your vagina and cervix. If a sample of tissue was taken from your cervix (biopsy), the lab results should be ready in 2 to 3 weeks.

Most women feel fine after a colposcopy. You may feel a little lightheaded and if you had a biopsy, you may have some light bleeding. Talk to your health care provider about how to take care of yourself after the procedure and when you need to return for a checkup.

## **Are there any risks with having a colposcopy?**

There is a very small risk of infection when you have a colposcopy. You may have mild pain and cramping during the procedure and light bleeding afterwards. This most often happens when a biopsy (a small sample of tissue taken from the cervix) is done. If you have heavy bleeding, a fever, or severe pain after the procedure, you should contact your health care provider right away.

## **For More Information...**

You can find out more about colposcopy, Pap tests, and cervical cancer by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center at 1-800-994-9662 or the following organizations:

### **Cancer Information Service**

Phone Number(s): (800) 422-6237

Internet Address: <http://cis.nci.nih.gov/>

### **American Cancer Society**

Phone Number(s): (800) 227-2345

Internet Address: <http://www.cancer.org>

### **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) Resource Center**

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264 x 192 (for publications requests only)

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org/>

### **National Cervical Cancer Coalition**

Phone Number(s): (800) 685-5531

Internet Address: <http://www.nccc-online.org/>

### **American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology**

Phone Number(s): (800) 787-7227

Internet Address: <http://www.asccp.org/>

All material contained in the FAQs is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services; citation of the source is appreciated.

*This FAQ reviewed by Edward L. Trimble, M.D., Ph.D., National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health.*

*July 2002*